Spotlight on children's issues:

an interview with Anne Smith

Sarah Boyd

Anne Smith has whipped across the Tasman to look after sick grandchildren in Melbourne when I catch up with her. The practical and personal has always been right up there, informing her research into children's issues and her strong advocacy on their behalf.

She is Emeritus Professor at the Children's Issues Centre at the University of Otago, where she was director from 1995 until last year. She is "retired" in the manner of many academics: leaving behind the administrative and bureaucratic pressure of running a centre, but continuing to write a book and be actively involved her own research and that of some students.

She has been an extremely influential figure in this country, from her focus on child development and early childhood education, and later on issues such as physical punishment of children and children's rights.

Professor Smith began her working life as a secondary-school science teacher, before moving into educational psychology, the field she pursued for her doctorate from the University of Alberta.

Arriving back in Dunedin to a lecturing job in the 1970s, she was immediately up against a familiar dilemma: "There was no really good childcare available and virtually no government funding for childcare."

The prevailing wisdom was that it wasn't good for young children to be away from their mothers for long. Both her instinct and her knowledge of research in other countries told her this wasn't the case, and she and a group of like-minded women became involved in setting up a model community crèche in Dunedin.

"We began this long battle to try to persuade the government that the answer wasn't just to keep children at home with their mothers, but to support them by providing good, quality early childhood centres."

The second wave of feminism helped push change along, but her focus was never just about making sure mothers had more opportunities. The key was to provide good, quality environments for children.

She says we now know much more about what constitutes good, quality early childhood education, and what a positive force it can be. The importance of quality is one of her key messages from many years of research, and it's one she hopes is now widely understood.

"I hope we have got to that stage in New Zealand where people of every political persuasion realise that the state has to keep providing good, quality early childhood education, because otherwise they are going to have to pick up the costs later in terms of remedial education and so on. It's a cost not to invest in it."

Moving to the Children's Issues Centre in 1995, one of things she was keen to do was to explore children's perspectives. An early project interviewed children of separated or divorced parents.

"There were thousands of studies, but almost none that talked to the children. I came to see that in all the so-called children's issues, the one voice that wasn't being heard was children."

The study broke new ground here and internationally, and led to significant changes in how children were treated in the legal process around divorce.

But while she is satisfied with those changes, she says there are still huge barriers put in the way of

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children's voices being heard, especially if they come from marginalised or vulnerable groups. Researchers have to deal with numerous gatekeepers, such as the CYF Research and Access Committee, when seeking to talk to children in care.

"The intention is to protect them, but it ends up preventing them having a voice. I think, past a certain age, children can give their own consent. That whole area of abuse and care and protection which we are so concerned about at the moment—you never hear from the children."

So it's another key message of her research: treat children like experts in their own lives.

She points to the benefits of this in research done by a colleague, Terry Dodds, who talked to children about physical punishment during the heated debate over the law change to enable adults to be prosecuted for physical punishment of children. Children were clear: adults are angry when they administer physical punishment, yet the opponents of the law change claimed physical punishment was carried out calmly and rationally as a disciplinary measure.

The centre did an extensive literature review on physical punishment and found all sorts of negative effects, much more so than the impact of divorce.

"It affected children's behaviour, levels of aggression, progress at school, attachment to parents, heaps of things. The stronger the physical punishment, the worst the effect, but even regular, quite mild punishment has been shown in some studies to have an impact."

She thinks people are changing their position, particularly amid the high levels of concern about child abuse. "Abuse is not the same as physical punishment, but there are connections. Sometimes what starts off as punishment, becomes abuse."

Still, a big attitudinal shift on the part of the public is needed. And, perhaps mindful of her current responsibilities for sick grandchildren, she sees more support for parents as a key ingredient.

"It's just a really hard job for parents bringing up small children—they're such complex creatures."

Three messages

- It's a cost to society not to invest in good, quality early childhood education.
- Children need to be treated like experts in their own lives.
- Regular physical punishment of children has an impact on things like behaviour, levels of aggression, and progress at school and it's best to totally avoid it.

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